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ABSTRACT

A study examined cable access centers--studios established by cable television systems for the use of community groups, institutions, and individuals--in order to identify the characteristics of those used frequently. Data were gathered from 119 respondents concerning 34 access centers in major metropolitan areas in the United States. The findings indicated that the number of cable access centers is growing, and that the majority of them are funded directly by the local cable company (or indirectly through a city's use of franchise fees). Most centers have paid directors and staff and state-of-the-art equipment, but differ widely in their number of programing hours and the programing content. In addition, the study found that access coalitions existed in the majority of communities with a center, and that at least half of the centers were required as a condition of the franchise agreement. Oversight by the local cable company appeared to be important to the level of activity of a center, and most centers engaged in public information practices, although the degree and techniques varied. (FL)

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Characteristics of Cable Access Centers In the Top 100 Media Markets

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CHARACTERISTICS OF CABLE ACCESS CENTERS IN THE TOP 100 MEDIA MARKETS

Cable access centers are a product of one-time Federal regulations designed to provide citizens, groups, and institutions entre to the medium of cable television with the broad intention of creating an environment conducive to improved communication between local government, other institutions and the public, and among individuals within a community.

Those regulations were promulgated in 1972 by the Federal Communications Commission[1] and soon became known simply as the "access rules." The rules required emerging cable television systems within the major population centers to have basic video equipment available for community institutions, groups, and individuals use in producing programming. The studios where those desirous of producing programming could do so came to be called "access centers." The rules also required thosecable systems to provide channel space on three "access channels" for the showing of the access productions.[2] The original rules required one channel each for local government, educational institutions and the public at large.[3] In 1976, the F.C.C. reduced the three-channel requirement to a single channel to serve all three groups. Those rules did not meet the test of judicial review. In 1979, the United States Supreme Court ruled that the access regulations were outside of the regulatory authority of the F.C.C.[4]

However, the legal ruling applied only at the Federal level and did not throw out access and access center provisions already written into local franchise agreements. Nor did the Supreme Court's ruling prohibit inclusion of access provisions in future franchise agreements. And, the Court's decision apparently did not eliminate the attractiveness of the

access concept. That concept was being operationalized through development of cable access centers throughout the country. For example, in 1979, the National Citizens' Committee for Broadcasting reported the existence of 53 access centers in the United States.[5] Evidence of access center activity continues in the popular press and in scholarly journals. Many major communities, not yet wired, are serving notice that cable companies vying for a cable franchise should be prepared to accept provisions for development of cable access centers as a condition of the franchise agreement.[6]

Cable access centers are attractive to a good number of social scientists, communicologists, video enthusiasts and city planners. The centers appear to some to be a continuation of efforts over the past two decades to provide greater access to the mass media by the general public, as manifested in Op/Ed newspaper pages and letters to the editor, and the display of viewer reaction in an increasing number of television news programs. To some the centers represent an opportunity to create the "Town Hall" type of participatory democracy thought to exist in Colonial America.[7] To others, access centers are conceptualized as a component of a community communications systems that provides a plethora of services, from at-home shopping and banking, to data processing, while allowing communities to monitor high crime and traffic areas, link hospitals and other institutions, and even read citizens' utility meters through application of computer technology to cable systems.[8] And, still others envision cable access centersas a way in which citizens and institutions can talk with one another across ethnic, economic, geographic, and political boundaries.[9]

A further attraction to some communities, it is assumed, is that cable access centers provide an appropriate way to spend the three-to-six per cent franchise fee paid by cable companies for exclusive operating rights within the community.

Thus cable access centers have developed and are surviving. Indications are that they will increase in number in the future. Cable television is today a service subscribed to by approximately one-fifth of all television viewers, constituting a collective cable audience comparable to any of the three major networks. And, it continues to grow, both in terms of channels offered and in geographic regions served.[10] As it spreads, cable access centers appear likely to continue to be a by-product of that growth.

Statement of the Problem

Consensus concerning the goals of cable access centers is elusive. The broad goal of the F.C.C. wasobvious: to provide a forum for improved communications exchange. That presupposes the need to provide that opportunity in some realistic ways, such as taking steps to ensure that the centers will remain available to the public through procedures such as continued funding, providing video equipment with which to produce access programming, perhaps having staff available to assist in that production, and disseminating information regarding the availability of the center and the presentation of its programming through other community information systems. The matter of "improved" communication is less clear. Do the number of hours of programming constitute "improvement" in programming? Does the number and amount of different types of programming represent "improvement?" It is difficult to determine, and, as noted, there is no evidence of consensus on the issue.

However, there is the obvious knowledge that centers are intended to be used. With that as a base, we can examine the centers that we know exist to determine their characteristics, particularly with regard to the comparative characteristics of centers that are used more frequently with those used less frequently. While identification of such characteristics may not necessarily indicate cause, in the absence of direct knowledge of cause, the characterisitcs can provide a reference point by inference and implication for communities contemplating an access experiment.

Identifying those characteristics is the problem which this study addresses.

Review of the Literature

Feldman's early work (1970) anticipated some of the opportunities and problems for locally originated programming. The Rand Corporation (1970), Smith (1970), Blakely (1971), the Sloan Commission on Cable Communications (1971), and Steiner all attempted to suggest the forms locally originated programming might take within cable communications systems. Gillispie (1974) attempted to determine the viability of the access concept by, in part, analyzing the developmental path taken by the National Film Board of Canada.

Wurtzel (1975), and Bretz (1975) were able to analyze single access experiments in terms of center programming and audience demographics. Similarly, Brownstein; Burns and Elton; Connell; Moss; Lucas; Baldwin; Greenburg, Block and Stoyanoff; Clarke; Kline, Schmacher and Evans; and Kay (1978) all reported on the use of cable as part of an interactive communications system, again within the scope of single system or single

audience settings. And, Dozier's unpublished analysis (1981) of the Modesto, California experience demonstrates some additional problems which can arise in programming content.

There is no evidence in the literature of a national study that attempts to examine cable access centers in the major media markets in terms of shared characteristics.

Methodology

Because of the cable system size specified in the 1972 F.C.C. access rules, the requirements were of particular importance to major population areas where cable systems could ultimately be expected to develop a large subscriber base. And, it is those major metropolitan areas that served as the basis for the collection of data in this study. A list of the top one hundred media markets (provided by Advertising Age) and a list of 52 access centers (provided by the National Citizens' Committee for Broadcasting) were used to compile a mailing list of 191 potential respondents within the major media markets. In January, 1980, a survey packet containing a questionnaire, a cover letter, and a self-addressed, stamped envelope was mailed to those potential respondents. From the first mailing (January 25, 1980), 72 sets of responses were gathered. A second mailing (March 14, 1980) resulted in the return of an additional 55 sets of responses. Telephone calls (April 14 and 15, 1980) produced two more sets. After unusable and duplicated response sets were eliminated, 119 completed questionnaires remained, a response rate of 62.3 percent. As a result of the census of the major metropolitan areas, data concerning

34 access were gathered. That data includes information relating to funding sources, staffing, management, equipment, diversity in sources and types of programming, existence of an access coalition prior to the granting of a franchise, whether the center was required as a condition of the franchise, and several questions relating to dissemination of information about the centers (public information practices).

The intent in gathering the data was multipurposeful. The first intent was simply to identify the number and location of access centers within the major metropolitan areas. Then, to determine the situations, conditions, and practices associated with the centers. It was hoped that those characteristics could then be used to indicate causal relationships.

Once the data were tabulated, the centers were ranked according to the number of hours a week of programming. This produced a range from 0 to 111 hours, with a median of 20 hours. It was decided to treat the number of hours as the dependent variable, with those above the median categorized as "high hour centers" and those below as "low hour centers." The dependent variable was then crosstabulated with a number of variables concerning such practices as funding, staffing, and information dissemination efforts; and conditions such as the existence of an organization to promote access (an "access coalition") prior to the granting of a cable franchise, and whether the center was established as a condition of the franchise agreement.

Selection of the hours of programming as the dependent variable is arbitrary but reasonable. There is little evidence of consensus as to the specific goals of individual centers in different communities, save the broad F.C.C. guidelines that they should function, and do so as a channel

for programming that would not otherwise be available; the essence of "narrowcasting." The dependent variable addresses that first concern; functionality. The second concern focuses on the need for a variety of programming sources (Dozier's study of the Modesto, California situation demonstrates that a lot of programming is not necessarily a diversity of programming). In that regard, steps were taken to determine whether the centers which constituted the dependent variable were producing a diversity of programming as well as a lot of programming.

The results are presented in a subsequent section of this paper.

Hypotheses

The author would be playing coy if he did not admit to anticipation of results. In fact, significant differences between the characteristics of high hour centers and those of low hour centers were expected. Further, it was thought that the high hour centers would be characterized by the following:

1. Existence of an access coalition prior to the granting of the franchise;
2. Development of the center as a condition of the franchise agreement;
3. A paid director for the center;
4. Staff to assist in programming production;
5. State-of-the-art equipment (one-half, three quarters, color-capable equipment);
6. Autonomy for the center's activities;
7. Diversity in programming sources and type; and,
8. An active information dissemination program.

Presentation of the Data

As Table 1 shows, the most often occurring form of funding among the high hour centers is through the local cable company (66.7%), with funding by the city as the next highest source (26.7%). Among the low hour centers, cable company funding is also the most common (38.9%).

Table 2 illustrates the fact that almost all the centers have a paid director and also have staff to assist with access programming production.

The data in Table 3 indicate that all but one of the centers are reported to have video equipment, that one-half-inch and three-quarter-inch equipment are common to the centers, and that two-inch equipment is uncommon. It also indicates that all but one of the centers are reported to have color-capable equipment.

Table 4 concerns some different sources of programming as well as program content. The most frequent sources are, in order: programming by local government; by the local educational community; and programming by other local, non-profit groups; followed by the presentation of artistic efforts; and the presentation of editorial comment. Programming by non-profit groups is the most often occurring program source in high hour centers, while non-profit groups and the local educational community are the sources of programming reported to occur most often in low hour centers.

Table 5 illustrates the frequency with which an access coalition exists in communities with a center. Forty percent of the low hour centers are characterized as having an access coalition in the community. The same can be said of 69.2 percent of the high hour centers. That coalition existed prior to the awarding of a franchise in one-third of the communities with a low hour center, and in one-fifth of the high hour centers. And, 50 percent

TABLE 1

SOURCES OF FUNDING

	CATV COMPANY	CITY	CONTRIBUTIONS	GRANTS	OTHER
LOW HOUR CENTERS	7 38.9%	1 5.6%	2 11.1%	3 16.7%	5 27.8%
HIGH HOUR CENTERS	10 66.7%	4 26.7%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 6.7%

TABLE 2

DIRECTOR & STAFF FOR CENTER

	HAVE DIRECTOR	HAVE ADDITIONAL STAFF
LOW HOUR CENTERS	13 72.2%	15 83.3%
HIGH HOUR CENTERS	15 100.0%	13 86.7%

TABLE 3

EQUIPMENT AT CENTERS

	HAVE VIDEO EQUIPMENT	1/2 INCH	3/4 INCH	2 INCH	COLOR-CAPABLE
LOW HOUR CENTERS	18 94.7%	6 37.5%	14 87.5%	1 6.3%	16 94.1%
HIGH HOUR CENTERS	15 100.0%	9 69.2%	12 92.3%	1 7.7%	15 100.0%

TABLE 4

PROGRAM DIVERSITY

	GOVERNMENT	EDUCATIONAL ENTITY	NON-PROFIT GROUP	ARTISTIC EFFORTS	EDITORIAL COMMENT
LOW HOURS CENTERS	11 61.1%	13 72.2%	13 72.2%	12 70.6%	6 33.3%
HIGH HOURS CENTERS	11 73.3%	14 93.3%	15 100.0%	14 93.3%	9 64.3%

TABLE 5

COALITIONS AND FRANCHISE CONDITIONS

	ACCESS COALITION EXISTS	COALITION EXISTED PRIOR TO FRANCHISE	CENTER REQUIRED AS CONDITION OF FRANCHISE AGREEMENT
LOW HOUR CENTERS	6 40.0%	3 33.3%	7 50.0%
HIGH HOUR CENTERS	9 69.2%	2 20.0%	10 83.3%

of the low hour centers were required as a condition of the franchise agreement, while 83.3 percent of the high hour centers were so required.

Table 6 shows the entity responsible for oversight of the center's activity. The cable company is responsible in more than half of the high hour centers (53.3%) and in slightly more than two-fifths (42.1%) of the low hour centers. The city has that responsibility in one-third (33.3%) of the high hour centers, and in slightly more than one-fifth (21.1%) of the low hour centers. And, a citizens' group is responsible in somewhat more than one-tenth (13.3%) of the high hour centers, but in more than one-third (36.8%) of the low hour centers. None of the centers are autonomous.

Table 7 illustrates the respondents' perception of the center's relations with local news media. Those results are reported as either "positive" or "negative." The low hour centers are split nearly in half, with 46.6 percent reporting their perception as positive, and 53.3 percent reporting their perception as negative. In the high hour category, the perceptual difference are far more dramatic, with 93.3 percent reporting a perceived positive relationship, and only 6.6 percent reporting a relationship perceived as negative.

Table 8 concerns news releases. Some 93.3 percent of the high hour centers issue news releases, while 62.9% of the low hour centers do so.

Table 9 shows the frequency of the issuance of the news releases. None of the low hour centers average one news release a day, or even one news release a week. Only 12.5 percent of the low hour centers average one news release a month. In the high hour category, 6.7 percent of the centers reportedly average one news release daily, while 40 percent average one a

TABLE 6

OVERSIGHT RESPONSIBILITY

	CABLE COMPANY	CITY	CITIZENS' GROUP	AUTONOMOUS
LOW HOUR CENTERS	8 42.1%	4 21.1%	7 36.8%	0 0.0%
HIGH HOUR CENTERS	8 53.3%	5 33.3%	2 13.3%	0 0.0%

TABLE 7

PERCEIVED RELATIONS
WITH LOCAL NEWS MEDIA

	POSITIVE RELATIONS PERCEIVED	NEGATIVE RELATIONS PERCEIVED
LOW HOUR CENTERS	7 46.6%	8 53.3%
HIGH HOUR CENTERS	14 93.3%	1 6.6%

TABLE 8

ISSUE NEWS RELEASES?

	YES	NO
LOW HOUR CENTERS	10 62.9%	6 37.5%
HIGH HOUR CENTERS	14 93.3%	1 6.7%

TABLE 9

HOW OFTEN

ISSUE NEWS RELEASES?

	DAILY	WEEKLY	MONTHLY	SPECIAL EVENTS ONLY	NEVER
LOW HOUR CENTERS	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	2 12.5%	8 50.0%	6 37.5%
HIGH HOUR CENTERS	1 6.7%	6 40.0%	3 20.0%	4 26.7%	1 6.7%

week, and one-fifth (20.0%) average one news release a month. One-half of the low hour centers issue a news release for special events only, while only slightly more than one-fourth (26.7%) of the high hour centers restrict themselves to special events only.

Table 10 shows that nearly half (46.7%) of the high hour centers issue a newsletter, while most low hour centers (85.7%) do not.

With regard to a similar public information practice, the holding of open houses at the center for press and public, half of the low hour centers (50.0%) hold open houses, and nearly three-fourths (73.3%) of the high hour centers do so (see Table 11).

The final information dissemination variable concerns attempts to place information regarding the center in the bulletins of other community organizations (such as churches, and social groups). The low hour centers are split equally, while three-fourths (75.0%) of the high hour centers engage in this practice (see Table 12).

Findings

The first hypothesis concerned the existence of an access coalition prior to the granting of a franchise. That does not appear to be an important characteristic of either high hour or low hour centers. Thus, the hypothesis is not supported.

However, development of the center as a condition of the franchise does appear to be important. It is characteristic of more than 80 percent (83.3%) of the high hour centers and of one-half (50.0%) of the low hour centers, supporting hypothesis 2.

TABLE 10

ISSUE NEWSLETTER?

	YES	NO
LOW HOUR CENTERS	2 14.3%	12 85.7%
HIGH HOUR CENTERS	7 46.7%	8 53.3%

TABLE 11

OPEN HOUSES HELD?

	YES	NO
LOW HOUR CENTERS	8 50.0%	8 50.0%
HIGH HOUR CENTERS	11 73.3%	4 26.7%

TABLE 12

BULLETIN INSERTS?

	YES	NO
LOW HOUR CENTERS	7 50.0%	7 50.0%
HIGH HOUR CENTERS	9 75.0%	3 25.0%

A paid director is characteristic of most centers (82.3%). Hypothesis 3, which predicted that high hour centers would be characterized by having a paid director, is supported. Likewise, an equal percentage (82.3%) have staff available, supporting hypothesis 4.

Most also have either one-half or three-quarter-inch, color-capable equipment, and high hour centers have such equipment somewhat more frequently than do low hour centers, supporting hypothesis 5.

Hypothesis 6, that purported that high hour centers would be characterized as autonomous, was not supported by the data. In fact, cable company oversight is the only variable which was statistically significant.

Hypothesis 7 concerning diversity in programming, is supported.

Hypothesis 8 concerning dissemination of information, is supported. Further, there are impressive differences between the high hour centers and the low hour centers with regard to this characteristic.

The expectation that there would be appreciable differences between the high and the low hour centers is not overwhelmingly supported by the data. And, it is only in the data concerning oversight and information dissemination practices that appreciable differences are obviously apparent. However, there are subtle, yet consistent indications that centers which produce more hours of programming each week are more strongly supported in terms of quaranteed development as a condition of the franchise agreement, long-term funding, staff, and in equipment availability. Further, they seem to demonstrate an ability to attract devotees (in the form of access coalitions), to present a wider diversity of programming, and to develop a more active public information program. Statistically, Pearson product-moment correlation

coefficients and chi-square values were not significant except with regard to the variable concerning the local cable company being responsible for the center's activities (corrected $X^2 = 9.24$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$).

Discussion

The difficulty, of course, is to apply caution and thoughtfulness in determining what the data tell us, and in avoiding unreasonable conclusions. Some serious questions could be raised, for example, if we attempt to assign causality to the variables in the study. One of the problems is that we know only of certain activities, and they may not be causal ones. We are limited, in large part, because the absence of consensus concerning that which these centers ought to be doing, limits us somewhat to a description of what they are doing. Further, the data could lead us to conclude that there are no significant difference in the practices, conditions, and situations characteristic of differentially active access centers. And, to do so would be to miss the point. In fact, the data are highly useful as indicators of characteristics or variables which, in fact, may be causal. To some degree, this is a problem one always faces in attempting to deal with broadbased research in an area where such research has not previously been undertaken.

For example, there is no statistical indication of causal difference whether funding is by a cable company or by the city. However, there are reasonable differences if one views funding by the company and by the city as one category, versus funding through contributions and grants as another category. What seems to be indicated is that there may be an effect based on the diffference between identified continuing sources of funding and less consistent funding sources. Certainly, it appears reasonable to expect a center to be

better able to attract producers, to plan for facilities use, and to maintain equipment needs when there is consistency in the funding.

Similarly, the differences with regard to a paid director and available staff are not dramatic. The data seem to indicate, in this regard, that what is important is having a director and staff. And, moreover, the funding and staffing indicate a commitment to the center, just as requiring development of the center as a condition of the franchise agreement indicates commitment.

The same message seems apparent with regard to equipment. Two-inch equipment is professional video equipment, not meant for use by amateurs, and generally not mobile enough to be used outside a studio except by those with specialized equipment. On the other hand, three-quarter-inch equipment, and especially half-inch equipment is well suited for amateur use, both in and outside of the studio environment. Most centers have half-inch or three-quarter-inch, color-capable equipment available. This represents not only a commitment but an awareness of the need to present messages that speak to an audience in the way they are accustomed,(color images)and with the level of production one would anticipate with a staff available.

The question of cable company oversight of the center's activities reinforces the pattern that is emerging. As noted, it is the only variable found to be statistically significant. It seems to indicate awareness on the part of the center personnel and those utilizing the center, that the facilitiy is a part of the community's services, funded, staffed, equipped, and with oversight by those with expertise in that field.

The diversity of programming indicates that the centers have been successful, by and large, in attracting program producers from throughout the community. Of course, there are degrees of success in this. One might expect, given the original access rules, that local government and the local educational community would become involved. In some centers, however, generally those that are more frequent producers of programming, the presentation of artistic efforts is considerable more common. And, presentation of editorial comment is twice as prevalent among high hour centers as in low hour centers. Why the difference? The answer could rest at least in part, with information dissemination efforts, or public information practices, undertaken by the centers. News releases for example, are a dramatically more common and frequent information dissemination technique among high hour centers. Similarly, the more programming active centers are also more active in publishing a newsletter, holding open houses, and issuing bulletin inserts. Additionally, there is the fact that the existence of an access coalition is considerably more prevalent among high hour centers than in low hour centers, although that coalition did not necessarily exist prior to the granting of a franchise. And, finally, we see that the high hour center is more likely to be a condition of the franchise agreement than the low hour one.

What emerges is a profile of an access center that could also be viewed, in some ways, as an indicator of the commitment of these involved. The center is funded, staffed, it has a director, it has equipment that can be used by non-professionals (but equipment that is still of reasonable quality, and color-capable), it attracts diverse sources as programmers, has developed its

own devoted organization (the access coalition), has its continued existence assured as part of the franchise agreement, and actively promotes itself through traditional community information systems. It is responsible to an identified organization that is expert in the video field.

What also seems to be operating is a commitment on the part of a community and the cable system to establish funds, staff, equip and maintain, and promote a center. That commitment may well be the key variable in access centers. Certainly, more research is needed to support this hypothesis, but indications to date suggest it.

Conclusions

The findings indicate that cable access centers exit in the top media markets of the United States, that they will likely be growing in number, that the majority are funded directly by the local cable company (or indirectly through the city using part of the franchise fee), that they have a paid director and staff, state-of-the-art equipment, that there are differences in the number of hours of programming produced and in the diversity of that programming, that access coalitions exist in the majority of the communities with an access center, that at least half of the centers are required as a condition of the franchise agreement, that oversight by the local cable company appears to be important to the level of activity of a center, and that most centers engage in public information practices, although the degree and techniques vary.

The practices, situations, and conditions characteristic of access centers seem more indicators of cause than causal themselves. And, the indications are that access centers are active and diverse in their

programming when the local cable company and local government demonstrate a commitment to creating and maintaining the center, and where the personnel of the center commit themselves to disseminating information regarding the center's availability and programming through traditional public information practices.

And finally, it seems reasonable to conclude that in communities with such a commitment on the part of the local cable company, local government, and center personnel, access to the medium of cable television can develop and flourish.

Implications for Further Research

Clearly, there is need for further research into the perceptions of the role of access centers among center personnel, local government, and access audiences. The broad goals of the original F.C.C. provisions were sufficient to set in motion the access movement. That movement is now taking shape in various communities, and there is a need for determination of perceptions as to what access can and should be attempting to accomplish. In essence, four publics are to be served: access center personnel; access program producers; city authorities; and, the access audience.

Additionally, the data indicate that research may be fruitful in the area of public information and access center activity. There seems to be a link between these two variables.

And, finally, it would be helpful to communities about to embark on an access experiment to have current data concerning the activities of centers throughout the United States, in communities large and small. That type of task that might best be carried out by organizations such as the National Cable Television Association, or the Cable Television Information Center.

And, there may be much to be learned through research concerning those who are not the cable access audience as well as those who are, to identify needs that access might meet, and to determine ways to better inform potential access participants of the opportunities that are available.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Cable Television Report and Order, FCC, 1972, Washington, D.C.

[2] Ibid

[3] Ibid

[4] U.S. Law Week, April 2, 1979, page 47, LW 4334

[5] Citizens' Media Directory, The National Citizens' Committee on Broadcasting, 1979, page 96-113

[6] Letter to Columbus Cable Services Administrator Ralph Squires from M.H. Rimerman, Director, Mayor's Office of Telecommunications, Baltimore, Maryland, November 17, 1977, and, Letter to Squires from Mayor of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 2, 1980

[7] Report to the President, The Cabinet Committee on Cable Communications, 1974, page 15

[8] Cable Television: Applications for Municipal Services Rand, 1973, page 14

[9] Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality, Verba and Nie, 1972, page 10

[10] Cable Television: An Industry Report, National Cable Television Association, 1975, page 3

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